

# Discovering the Modern Regime of Translation in China: Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past* and Wuhe's *Remains of Life*

Jon Solomon  
University of Lyon

## Abstract

This essay focuses on the salient place given to staging both the *modern regime of translation* and the *institution of literature* alongside a dramatization of *anthropological difference* in Liu Cixin's acclaimed science fiction trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (also known as *The Three Body Problem*). These are concerns that are, I would argue, not only historically central to twentieth-century Chinese literature, but also place twentieth-century Chinese literature squarely at the crux of some of the most fundamental questions about aesthetic modernity. These questions revolve around the way in which the type or the figure plays a crucial role in the construction of the nation-state.

As quintessentially modern social institutions, both the regime of translation and the institution of literature converge around *aesthetic ideology*, in which the figure and the type play a paramount role. This is not just any figure, but rather the figure of the human, configured through the logical economy of genus, species, and individual. As a kind of abstraction that is intimately woven into the fabric of everyday life (or what Marx calls a “real abstraction”), this “logical economy” is most evident in that experience of identity peculiar to modernity: being an individual who belongs to a national community within that community's membership in a larger, single species among other species. Together, these two institutions form an inherently comparative biopolitical infrastructure that I call the *apparatus of area and anthropological difference*.

A brief comparison with Wuhe's *Remains of Life* helpfully illustrates the extent to which Liu Cixin's Trilogy is invested in the

apparatus of area and anthropological difference that arises through the operation of translation, while a comparison with Mao Dun's focus on subjective formation helps to highlight the implications of Liu Cixin's attack on Chinese socialist realism. Liu's fiction should not be seen as what happens when a large developing nation with a tradition of literary talent achieves the concentration of capital and technology that might permit an ambitious space program, but as what happens when the international institution of literature develops on the basis of an historical repression of its own aesthetic ideology.

### **Keywords**

modern regime of translation, institution of literature, realist fiction, aesthetic ideology, becoming-minor, species difference

## **1. The Modern Regime of Translation, the Institution of Literature, and Liu Cixin's *Remembrance of Earth's Past***

This essay focuses on the salient place given to staging both the modern regime of translation (Sakai 2018, Walker 2014) and the *institution of literature* (Derrida 1992; Weber 1987) alongside a dramatization of *anthropological difference* in Liu Cixin's 劉慈欣 acclaimed science fiction trilogy, *Remembrance of Earth's Past* (alternately referred to in this essay as the *Trilogy*, *Remembrance*, or Liu's *Trilogy*).<sup>1</sup> These are concerns that are, I would argue, not only historically central to twentieth-century Chinese literature, but also place twentieth-century Chinese literature squarely at the crux of some of the most fundamental questions about aesthetic modernity. These questions revolve around the way in which the type or the figure plays a crucial role in the construction of the nation-state. While Sakai's concept of the modern regime of translation explains the role of translation in the establishment of a representational schema of linguistic difference that disciplines the individual's relation to a nationalized or ethnicized community, the Derridean concept of the institution of literature concerns the relation among different disciplinary domains (literature, criticism, and theory) in the aesthetic configuration of the nation-state. As quintessentially modern social institutions, both the regime of translation and the institution of literature converge around *aesthetic ideology* (Button 2009; Redfield 2003), in which the figure and